MYTHS, LIES, & HALF-TRUTHS
HOW MISREADING THE BIBLE NEUTRALIZES CHRISTIANS AND EMPOWERS LIBERALS, SECULARISTS, AND ATHEISTS
GARY DEMAR
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Myths, Lies and Half-Truths

How Misreading the Bible Neutralizes Christians and Empowers Liberals, Secularists, and Atheists

Gary DeMar
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Preface

First-century believers could have offered tangible evidence that there was little chance for the gospel to have an impact on the status quo of religious and civil oppression in their day. How could a small band of men—led by a fisherman (Peter) and a tentmaker (Paul)—living under Roman occupation ever conceive that their circumstances would change enough so that the gospel message would lead to the transformation of the world? To add to the improbability of a world-wide impact, soon after the victorious ascension of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on His disciples, one of their own was killed by a leader of the religious establishment (Acts 7:54–60). What did God do? He converted the man who led the persecution and made him a missionary to the Roman Empire! (9:1–31). After Stephen’s death, James, the brother of John, was executed by the local civil governor (12:1–2) and Peter was arrested and thrown in prison. What did God do? Herod “was eaten by worms and died” (12:23). Through tradition we learn that every apostle, with the exception of John, died a martyr. Even so, God’s kingdom continued to advance (28:30–31).

The Roman Empire was the major kingdom force in the first century, and the church was relegated to footnote status by the historians of the day. How times have changed. The historians of that era are footnotes in today’s textbooks, time is still measured by the birth of Christ—even with the use of BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) by the academic establishment—the Roman Empire is a memory and its remaining buildings are tourist
attractions, but the church of Jesus Christ circles the globe. If God accomplished all of this with a few disciples with little or no social influence and no political connections, why does it seem incredible to accomplish something similar with hundreds of millions of believers today? Is the gospel any less effective?

**The Vanishing Christian Worldview**

In his book *The Vanishing Conscience*, pastor John MacArthur tries to argue that “Reclaiming the culture is a pointless, futile exercise. I am convinced,” he writes, “we are living in a post-Christian society—a civilization that exists under God’s judgment.”

MacArthur and other Christians believe that such conditions serve as immovable impediments to reformation. Scripture and history are not on his side. The gospel entered a non-Christian society and transformed it. We may live in a post-Christian world, but it wouldn’t take much time or effort to reverse the trend. Even Tim LaHaye, co-author of the popular *Left Behind* series that presents a pessimistic view of the future, thinks MacArthur is off base. “Personally,” Tim and Beverly LaHaye write, “we have serious problems with that kind of thinking. . . . If we just give up on our country, America may be sentenced to an unnecessary hundred or so years living without the freedom to preach the gospel here or around the world—simply because we gave up on our culture too soon.”

In their book *Mind Siege*, co-authors David Noebel and LaHaye write the following:

> The Christian life should never be dull or boring. There is plenty to do in all spheres of life. The importance of Christians entering the cultural sphere (art, music, popular entertainment, theater, media, law, religion, education) cannot be overlooked or underestimated.

> As Robert Bork makes very clear in his work, conservatives who hold a pro-moral point of view might control the White House and the Congress, but still “they cannot attack modern liberalism in its fortress . . . Hollywood,
the network evening news, universities, church bureaucracies, the New York Times and the Washington Post.” Modern liberals, says Bork, “captured the government and its bureaucracies because they captured the culture.”

Christians need to ponder this point carefully. Christian parents need to prepare their sons and daughters to invade the fortress of the left. Someday the major newscasters will retire, and there is nothing amiss in believing that well-prepared Christians can replace them.³

Unfortunately, while LaHaye’s points are well made, his call for any type of social action cannot be sustained over time because his eschatology, his view of the future, will not allow it. In their book Charting the End Times, LaHaye and co-author Thomas Ice write, “we believe that our generation has more signs to indicate that Christ could come in our lifetime than any generation before us.”⁴ They believe that God is “setting the stage”⁵ for the “rapture.” If this is the case, then MacArthur is right, so why expend energy training Christians to replace newscasters, journalists, college professors, lawyers, educators, and politicians who may not retire for another 20 years? If the stage has been set for the “rapture,” and LaHaye is correct in his interpretation of current prophetic events, then he is promoting an activist worldview that is destined to fail no matter how much Christian effort is expended.

LaHaye understands the logical dilemma he has unwittingly created with the publication of his innumerable prophetic writings that reinforce the idea that the time for the “rapture” is indeed near:

Because present world conditions so closely resemble Bible prophecies of the last days (see 2 Timothy 3:1–7; 2 Peter 3:1–4; Matthew 24:6–7, 37–38), some Christians have concluded that a takeover of our culture by the forces of evil is inevitable. Consequently they do nothing to resist it. They say, “It is necessary that perilous times
shall come as we approach the end of the age,” so they are unwilling to raise their voices in protest.\(^6\)

Having written this in a book dealing with the Christian worldview, LaHaye cannot bring himself to write the same cautionary words in his books dealing with end-time events. In a June 19, 2000, interview with CNN’s Larry King, LaHaye said, “In fact, I believe there are a number of signs in Scripture that indicate it’s going to come pretty soon. We say maybe within our lifetime.”\(^7\) Jerry Jenkins, the co-author of the *Left Behind* series, has a prophetic novel of his own with the title *Soon.* And what is to happen “soon”? The subtitle says it all: *The Beginning of the End.*\(^8\) If prophetic events are going to happen “soon,” “within our lifetime,” why should anyone plan for even the immediate future and expect any long-term and lasting success?

The LaHayes have always been a bit schizophrenic on the relationship between Bible prophecy and Christian activism. Beverly LaHaye worked to stem the tide of secularism with her effective Concerned Women of America (CWA) organization, and Tim writes his prophetic books against the backdrop of the rising tide of secularism. Even so, I would rather have LaHaye’s prophetic schizophrenia than MacArthur’s prophetic fatalism.

**The Next Christendom?**

America could be reduced to a burned out cinder, yet God’s Church will still go on. Even world-wide disasters (plagues and world wars) did not mark “the end.” As history shows, there have been many who have been premature in writing the obituary of the Church and Christian civilization. The doctrine of the Church is bigger than our nationalist limitations, and it is more powerful and resilient than the most demanding evils. “Over the past five centuries or so, the story of Christianity has been inextricably bound up with that of Europe and the European-driven civilizations overseas, above all in North America. Until
recently, the overwhelming majority of Christians have lived in White nations, allowing theorists to speak smugly, arrogantly, of ‘European Christian’ civilization. . . . Already, today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America,” and we can add, China.

The struggles of these “non-White” nations far outweigh the moral and political struggles we are facing in the United States. They have none of our evangelical infrastructure (a church on every corner), but they seem to be making remarkable evangelical progress. Only time will tell what type of evangelicalism is sprouting and how it will be maintained. As long as the end-time speculative writings of MacArthur and LaHaye are kept at bay and we continue to believe in the power of the gospel, the future looks bright for these burgeoning Christian nations. There may also be hope for America as well.

The structures are in place to turn our nation around. What do we lack? It’s not money, people, organization, or skills. We lack motivation, knowledge, and vision. Modern-day American Christianity is not what I bought into when I became a Christian. The first light of the gospel brought a dramatic change in my life. Paul’s words about being a “new creature in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17) were and are real. I believed that what was true for me as an individual was also true for the whole body of Christ. As I’ve traveled around the United States, I’ve watched and listened to what passes for the gospel on “Christian” television and radio, frequented Christian bookstores, endured shelves filled with countless books on “relational” Christianity (“What can Jesus do for me?”), Christian fiction, end-time novels, and VeggieTales® and BibleMan DVDs. I have often wondered if Christians really understand the true power of the gospel.

I know politics is viewed as a dirty business by many Christians (what isn’t?), but it wouldn’t take much to reshape the face of Congress. With this accomplished, the make-up of the Supreme Court and the lower courts could also be affected. What would it
take? Getting Christians to vote to limit the power of civil governments at all levels. The few conservative Christian voices that are struggling in Washington need help. A five to ten percent shift in the balance of power is possible in upcoming elections if Christians will take advantage of the opportunity. LaHaye and Noebel point out that “only 48 percent of Christians bother to vote, even in presidential elections.”

The goal, of course, is not to use politics as a club to impose a top-down moral regime on America. Christians must understand that civil government has a very narrow focus and limited jurisdiction. The goal is to get the welfare genie back in its bottle and an activist judiciary returned to Pandora’s Box with the lid closed down tight. Politics is not a reforming agent, but it is something that needs reforming. It certainly can inhibit reform by creating draconian laws designed to relativize public discourse on any issue.

We are told that there are no simple answers. As New York University president John Sexton stated: “Our [secular] universities are committed to the deep and nuanced study of humanity. The more sophisticated you are, the more you tolerate ambiguity.” The goal of secularism is ambiguity, intellectual as well as moral. That’s why when Christians advocate placing the Ten Commandments in a court house, and in granite no less, the political establishment faints in disbelief and awakens in outrage. There is a fear that people might actually obey the Ten Commandments and begin to believe that there is a God, and He’s not any of the justices who sit on the Supreme Court. Am I exaggerating? In Stone v. Graham (1980), the court wrote, “If the posted copies of the Ten Commandments are to have any effect at all, it will be to induce the schoolchildren to read, meditate upon, perhaps to venerate and obey, the Commandments. However desirable this might be as a matter of private devotion, it is not a permissible state objective under the Establishment Clause.” The fear is that people might actually believe that there is a God who demands something of His creatures. What a
shocking assertion. How can Christians remain silent and sit still when such nonsense passes as a Supreme Court decision? In 1965, Rousas J. Rushdoony spotted the logic of a court that sees itself as the foundation of law:

If there is no God and no divinely ordained law, then not only does perversion have equal rights with morality, but actually truer rights, because Christian morality is seen as an imposition on and a dehumanization of man, whereas perversion is an act of liberty and autonomy for this school of thought.\(^\text{12}\)

As the courts mumble about toleration and diversity, we are beginning to see a pattern: Any laws based on religious assumptions, particularly Christian religious assumptions, cannot be by definition part of America’s legal discourse. So what do we do about this? According to MacArthur, not much. Preach the gospel, to be sure, and hope that this will have a leavening effect on the culture. But even if the country were 80 percent Christian, and this majority decided not to involve themselves in the broader culture, the remaining 20 percent would rule us and in the end deny Christians and everyone else their freedoms.

Notes
5. LaHaye and Ice, *Charting the End Times*, 118.


Introduction

“Have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women” (1 Tim. 4:7a).

When I was very young, I remember seeing a western on television where a dispute was settled by the answer to a single Bible question. I can’t tell you anything else about the show, but that one scene is etched in my mind. Here’s the question: “Who cut off Samson’s hair?” A smile appeared on the man’s face as he confidently responded, “Delilah.” No doubt the majority of people would have given the same answer, and they, like the man in the long-forgotten western, would be wrong. A careful reading of the biblical text shows something that surprises a lot of people:

And she had made him [Samson] sleep on her knees, and called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his hair. Then she began to afflict him, and his strength left him (Judges 16:19).

While the Samson and Delilah hair removal story is not a central doctrine of the Christian faith, it does demonstrate that if a misreading of the Bible is passed on as fact, with few people ever checking
the text for accuracy, then, by default, misinformation or worse (myths, lies, or half-truths) becomes part of the biblical record. This isn’t the only bit of biblical misinformation that now plagues the church. Some of these are harmless misreadings of Scripture: the belief that the forbidden fruit was an apple (no fruit is specified), that Jonah was swallowed by a whale (it was “a great fish”), and that angels have wings (they don’t). These and other fables parade as facts only because we have heard them for so long and fail to examine “the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). The following questions are designed to test your knowledge of the Bible. No interpretation is needed. These are simple questions of fact alone:

1. The following phrase is found in the Bible: “Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.” True or false?
2. Noah’s ark landed on Mt. Ararat. True or false?
3. “Pride goes before a fall?” True or false?
4. Complete the following: “The ______________ will dwell with the lamb.”
5. Elijah was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. True or false?
6. How many wise men came to visit Jesus while he lay in the manger?
7. Jesus stumbled and fell while He was carrying His cross. True or false?
8. Where in the Bible is 6-6-6 found?
9. Where in the Bible does it say that Jesus will reign on the earth for a thousand years?
10. What is the biblical definition of “antichrist,” and in which book of the Bible is he mentioned the most?

How well did you do? If Christians have adopted myths as truths where little or any interpretation is needed, is it possible that
they may have adopted myths as truths in areas where greater study is needed?\textsuperscript{11}

“\textit{You’ve Heard It Said}”

Jesus encountered a similar problem with those who misread or misunderstood what the Bible actually states. “You have heard that the ancients were told. . .” (Matt. 5:21) and “You have heard that it was said. . .” (5:27) were repeated five times by Jesus in a series of twenty-eight verses. If we were to translate Jesus’ words into a contemporary setting, we might hear Him say: “Contrary to what you may have heard, you are mistaken on what you think the Bible says on this issue. You are, therefore, equally mistaken on how these passages should be interpreted and applied. Let Me clear up the confusion for you by directing you to take a closer look at Scripture.” Jesus was correcting erroneous beliefs about the Bible. He was not rebuking His listeners for not believing that the Bible is God’s infallible and inerrant Word. Jesus touched on four areas:

\begin{itemize}
  \item An out-of-context reading and application of a text (Matt. 5:21).
  \item A misreading or an incomplete reading of a text (5:38).
  \item A misstatement of fact (5:43).
  \item Faulty reasoning from an incorrectly established premise.
\end{itemize}

Jesus was not declaring a new set of rules for the church to obey by discounting what had been written in what Christians know as the “Old Testament.” He was simply holding His first-century audience accountable for how they were misreading Scripture and urging them not to rely on what they had heard was written. For example, if you read Matthew 5:38–40 and compare it to Exodus 21:22, you will notice that Jesus did not replace capital punishment with a turn-the-other-cheek ethic. Exodus 21:22 clearly states that “judges” are to decide what punishment is to be imposed. Victims could not take personal vengeance (cf. Rom. 12:18–21; cf. 13:4). There were some in
Jesus’ day who were taking a law that was meant for civil authorities to adjudicate and carry out and were applying it to personal situations. The consequences can be devastating (James 4:1–2). D. A. Carson gives a helpful interpretation of Jesus’ words:

Jesus says something like this: “You have heard that it was said . . . but I tell you . . . .” He does not begin these contrasts by telling them what the Old Testament said, but what they had heard it said. This is an important observation, because Jesus is not negating something from the Old Testament, but something from their understanding of it.

In other words, Jesus appears to be concerned with two things: overthrowing erroneous traditions, and indicating authoritatively the real direction toward which the Old Testament Scriptures point.¹²

These misreadings led to misunderstandings which resulted in creating a mythological tradition that had the effect of nullifying what God’s Word actually said and meant. Over time, the traditions were used by religious authorities to supplant the truth and misdirect the people down an unbiblical path. Jesus said the following to the Scribes and Pharisees: “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men . . . . You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition” (Mark 7:8–9).

Like the Bereans of Paul’s day (Acts 17:11), Christians should check the veracity of all opinions against the only reliable standard of authority that God has placed in our hands: the Bible. This may mean a change in belief systems for some. There is no novelty in this. God confronted Peter directly about the inclusion of Gentiles into the household of faith (10:9–16). Paul confronted Peter “to his face” on a similar matter (Gal. 2:11–14). There are times when we all need to be knocked off our horse of mistaken opinions (Acts 9:4). “Testing” is a biblical mandate (2 Cor. 13:5; 1 John 4:1).
Contrary to Popular Opinion

Myths, Lies and Half-Truths adopts Jesus’ methodology of taking a closer look at God’s Word and applies it to erroneous misinterpretations that have resulted in a virtual shut-down of the church’s full-orbed mission in the world (Acts 20:27). These traditional but mistaken interpretations and applications of popular Bible texts to contemporary issues have resulted in the Christian faith being “thrown out and trampled under foot by men” (Matt. 5:13). Too many Christians believe, along with a watching world, that the Bible is irrelevant this side of heaven. While the homosexual community is about one percent of the population, it has had and continues to have tremendous impact on our culture and laws. Christians, who make up about 35 percent of the population, seem to have voluntarily abandoned culture and hidden the gospel under a bushel waiting for a rescue from heaven that is always said to be coming “soon.” This is the first time in the history of the church that such a minimalized worldview has become so pervasive in the church.

There was a time when the gospel of Jesus Christ touched every area of a person’s life and the world in which he lived. This is no longer the case. Certainly the humanists have attempted to bar Christ’s words from what is often described as the “secular” realm. But Christians have barred themselves by teaching a one-dimensional gospel. The Bible tells us about the tithe but not about taxes. We’ve left that to the humanists. A majority of Christians still send their children to the very schools that deny Christ and his Word, and we wonder why the humanists are setting today’s cultural agenda.  

Our nation is in a crisis. The world is crying out for answers in the face of bewildering and seemingly unsolvable problems. This book demonstrates that the Bible has real answers and shows that the church has been instrumental throughout history in the development of what is uniformly described as a comprehensive Christian worldview.
Neutralized No Longer

In order to demonstrate the validity of Christianity as a religion for all of life, it is necessary to demythologize the misrepresentations that have been nurtured by a bewildering number of unorthodox theologies. These “cherished myths” have had the effect of neutralizing the Word of God as it relates to this world. Christianity has often been accused of being too “otherworldly” in that it has failed to offer viable political, economic, judicial, and social programs for the world order. The teaching of Jesus that his kingdom “is not of this world” has been interpreted to mean that earthly life must merely be endured and that Christians cannot expect to accomplish lasting reform before the return of Christ.

But does the New Testament really offer no guidance for shaping political or economic policy? Does it contain no judicial or social precepts that may be applied in today’s society? True, neither Jesus nor Paul spoke in detail of political or economic ideologies. But since both spoke out of a Jewish background and context with “all Scripture” in mind (2 Tim. 3:16–17), direct allusions may have been unnecessary. Christians must understand that their faith is rooted in all the Bible which contains highly specific political, economic, judicial, and social precepts that give guidance to all of life. The fact that such ideals exist as an intrinsic part of Christianity can go a long way toward establishing the credibility of the Christian faith in these areas.15

Christianity’s failure to be a practical religion in the past 150 years or more has meant the success of a perverted and twisted secularism and an advancing militant Islam that are doing incalculable harm at home and abroad. Humanism and Islam have gained the upper hand by default. The rejection of any type of this-worldly application of the Bible has resulted in the proliferation of a man-centered worldview that has steadily drained the life out of our world and left behind a spiritual vacuum. Will the church of Jesus Christ be ready with biblical answers for the millions who will be ready to follow the light of the gospel of grace and all that it means
for their lives this side of heaven as the worldviews of humanism and Islam continue to be exposed as “folly”? (2 Tim. 3:9). Now is the time to make the necessary theological preparations. It is my prayer that this book will help in that task.

Notes

1. False. This phrase in not found in the Bible. It appears in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. The biblical text reads, “By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Gen. 3:19).

2. False. The ark rested on the “mountains of Ararat”: “And in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark rested upon the mountains of Ararat” (Gen. 8:4).

3. False: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18, KJV). As you can see, it’s a “haughty spirit that goes before a fall.” The first phrase is confused with the second phrase.

4. “Lion” is incorrect: “And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them” (Isa. 11:6) and “The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox...” (65:25).

5. False. “And it came about when the LORD was about to take up Elijah by a whirlwind to heaven, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal” (2 Kings 2:1). A “chariot of fire and horses of fire” separated Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:11).

6. First, the Bible does not tell us the number of magi who visited Jesus. We do know that there were more than one and that they presented Him with three gifts (Matt. 2:11). The inference is, based on the number of gifts, that there were three of them. The wise men are never named, although tradition has them as Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. Second, by the time the wise men find Jesus, He is in a house: “And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother” (2:11). Matthew 2:1 states: “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.” The magi began their travels from the east after first seeing the star. We do not know how long it took them finally to reach Jerusalem and then Bethlehem, but it was soon after Jesus’ birth. For a discussion of this topic, see Floyd Nolen Jones, The Chronology of the Old Testament: A Return to the Basics, 15th ed. (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, [1993] 2005), 214–217.

7. We know that Jesus carried His own cross (John 19:17); we also know that Simon was called upon to carry it after Jesus first took it up (Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26); but we can only speculate as to why Simon was asked to bear Jesus’ cross.

8. The number of the mark of the beast is not three sixes: “Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six” (Rev. 13:18; also see 1 Kings 10:14).

9. No verse in the Bible specifically states that Jesus will reign on the “earth” for
a thousand years: “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was
given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of
the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not
worshipped the beast or the image, and had not received the mark upon their
forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ a
thousand years” (Rev. 20:4).

10. An antichrist, and there were many in John’s day (1 John 2:18), is anyone
who “does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 John 7). The
only other uses of the Greek word “antichrist” are found in 1 John 2:22 and 4:3.
The word “antichrist” does not appear in Revelation.

Been Told* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008) and J. Stephen Lang, *What the Bible
Didn’t Say: Popular Myths and Misconceptions About the Good Book* (New York:

12. D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Exposition of Mat-


PART ONE

Christians and the World
“The World Is Unimportant”

Myth, Lie, or Half-Truth?: The world is full of sin. One day God will burn up the world and create a new world. In the meantime, Christians should focus on what’s really important—the world above.

The Christian is in the world, but not of the world. This constitutes the basis for the perennial problem involved in the discussion of Christian culture. Because believers are not of the world, there have always been many Christians who have taken a negative attitude toward culture. They understand the Christian’s calling to consist exclusively in proclaiming salvation through Christ to lost men in a dying world. They see that dying world only as lying under the sentence of death and final judgment. Others, having eagerly accepted the Pauline assurance, “all things are yours,” stress the fact that believers have a cultural calling here and now to subdue the earth as members of the human race.¹

Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971), Premier of the former Soviet Union, described a time in the Communist republic’s history when a wave of petty theft was sweeping through the government-owned plants. To curtail the stealing, guards were placed at factory
entrances to watch the laborers as they entered and departed. At the Leningrad timberworks, one of the guards spotted Pyotr Petrovich leaving the yard with a wheelbarrow filled with a bulky sack. A guard became dutifully suspicious.

“Come on, Petrovich,” said the guard. “What have you got there?”

“Just sawdust and shavings,” Petrovich replied.

“Come on,” the guard said, “I wasn’t born yesterday. Tip it out.” Out it came—nothing but sawdust and shavings. So he was allowed to put it all back again and go home.

The same thing happened every night all week, and the guard was getting extremely frustrated. Finally, his curiosity overcame his frustration.

“Petrovich,” he said, “I know you. Tell me what you’re smuggling out of here, and I’ll let you go.”

“Wheelbarrows,” said Petrovich.\(^2\)

Error has been smuggled into the church under the pretense of truth since the beginning of time (Gen 3:1–7). Jesus warned His disciples not to be led astray by traditions that have the effect of setting “aside the commandment of God” (Mark 7:9). Paul cautioned the “elders of the church” at Ephesus that after his departure “savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:17, 29–30). It’s no less true today than in John’s day that “many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1), many of whom “went out from us” (2:19).

Some are surprised that false doctrines often arise from within the church, “from among your own selves,” as Paul warns. That’s what makes error insidious; it’s promoted by someone from within. Jesus saved His harshest criticism for the religious leaders of Israel
for the simple reason that they are religious leaders who carry the weight of authority with their words and actions (Matt. 21:23–46; 23:2–3; James 3:1).

While a false doctrine has the trappings of truth, in terms of what the Bible actually tells us, it is rotten to the core (Matt. 23:25–28). Heresy most often enters the church under the cover of some orthodox position. A grain of truth grows into a mountain of error. Irenaeus, a second-century Christian writer, describes how error is most often covered by a thin veneer of recognizable orthodoxy:

> Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to be inexperienced (ridiculous as the expression may seem) more true than truth itself.3

The claim is often made by some well-meaning Christians that the world and the things in the world are off-limits to Christians; that the best way to live the Christian life is not to get involved in “the world.” Holiness is defined by some as a rejection of the world as a place or arena for comprehensive redemption. Others go so far as to argue for a physical escape from this world through some cataclysmic eschatological event like a pretribulational rapture that is always said to be “near.”4 “In doing so they have virtually turned their backs on the world in which they live.”5 These beliefs go counter to the overwhelming biblical evidence that God has made us stewards of His good creation of which one day He will demand an accounting of our actions or inactions (Matt. 25:14–30).

**This Is My Father’s World**

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) said, “there is not one inch of creation of which Christ doesn’t say ‘Mine.’”6 Kuyper put this message into practice as a church reformer, university founder (Free
University of Amsterdam), journalist (editor of *The Standard*), political leader (the ideological force behind the Antirevolutionary Party), and statesman (premier of the Netherlands). His vision was “that in spite of all worldly opposition, God’s holy ordinances shall be established again in the home, in the school, and in the State for the good of the people; to carve as it were into the conscience of the nation the ordinances of the Lord, to which the Bible and Creation bear witness, until the nation pays homage again to God.”

Too often we find Christians who believe or at least live as if they believe that “there is not one inch of creation of which Satan doesn’t say ‘Mine.’”

Many Christians would think it impossible and even “unspiritual” to have a leadership role in the areas Kuyper considered a necessary part of Christian ministry. Historically, the church did not divide the world into opposing realms, consisting of a good sacred/spiritual realm and a bad secular/material realm. More importantly, the Bible does not divide the world this way. The Bible is concerned about the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, moral and immoral, whether in the church or in the world, whether material or spiritual.

The biblical doctrine of creation tells us that the created order is an arena for Christian action. God put Adam and Eve in the midst of the garden to “cultivate it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). A delegated sovereignty had been given to mankind to be caretakers over the created order (1:26). While God reserves ultimate authority and sovereignty for Himself, He delegates a subordinate authority and sovereignty to men and women as stewards. God also sets the rules by which they are to exercise that delegated stewardship and sovereignty. In fact, it was the breaking of these established creation laws that got Adam and Eve exiled from the garden. Gordon J. Spykman describes God’s own perspective on the world He created: “Creation . . . was and is and remains God’s first and foremost revelation. . . . God did not create junk, and being jealous of his handiwork, He does not discard what He creates.”
Maker Of Heaven and Earth

The opening line of the Apostles’ Creed tells us that God is the “Maker of Heaven and Earth,” of a creation that He Himself describes as being “very good” (Gen. 1:31). The New Testament reinforces the goodness factor of the creation even in its post-fall condition: “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:4–5). God created the world with design and purpose in mind. God is not the world as in pantheism, nor is He indifferent to or distant from the world as with deism. The world is not an emanation from God’s being as in New Age humanism. “The creed confesses a living God; no detached spectator on the world and its fate, God is the leading actor. All powerful, he retains and exercises the initiative. This is the most basic theme in the Christian world view.”

To be sure, sin has affected the world. Even so, God has not forsaken it, just as He has not forsaken us because of our sin (Rom. 5:6). His redeeming work in and over this world has a transforming effect on all aspects of our fallen domain. God was pleased to dwell in Christ “and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through His blood; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col. 1:20). We learn through Scripture that “whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4). “The Christian’s responsibility on earth is to transform the world that ‘thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6:10).” Heaven is the pattern, earth is the work in progress.

Because God is the One who brought “heaven and earth” into existence and “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3), these truths alone should be enough to convince all Christians who recite the opening line of the Apostles’ Creed that this world is important and is a legitimate place to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. While evil may exist in this world because
of sin, the world in and of itself is not evil. “Whatsoever is evil, is not so by the Creator’s action, but by the creature’s defection.”

Therefore, we should be skeptical of any theological position that defames any part of God’s good creation by declaring it off-limits to Christians. “There is no nature originally sinful, no substance in itself evil, no being, therefore, which may not come from the same fountain of goodness.”

**Practicing Pagans**

Some Christians have forsaken the biblical doctrine of creation, not as a belief, but as a practical application of how they actually live. They contend that while God created the physical heavens and earth, the created order is an incumbrance, a temporary inconvenience this side of the afterlife. Such beliefs have more in common with pagan religious assumptions than with the Bible. For example, animists are anti-world. They believe that nature is governed by capricious unseen forces that bedevil and disturb the natural order of things. Animists contend that nature is *animated*, alive with unpredictable gods, goddesses, sprites, and evil forces intent on disorder. This has the effect of turning nature into a living essence that is to be feared and placated rather than examined, developed, and probed.

The results of animist belief patterns are evident in that science and technology rarely develop in these cultures beyond some initial discoveries. “Nor could science have originated in India among the Hindus, nor in China among the Buddhists, for both Hinduism and Buddhism teach that the physical world is unreal and that the only reality is that of the world’s soul and that the greatest thing anyone has to learn is that the physical world is not real. Therefore, there would have been no point in spending one’s life fooling with that which had no reality in the first place.”

While Christians don’t share the worldview of animists, Buddhists, and Hindus, many who hold anti-world belief patterns do so because of misguided theological perceptions that have the same
anti-world effects. The development of culture, art, music, science, literature, medicine would never have developed if Christians had followed an anti-world theology that is still prevalent in much of the world today.\textsuperscript{15}

**Your World Is Too Small**

In 1960, J. B. Phillips wrote a book with a shocking title—*Your God is Too Small*. “For many persons,” he pointed out, “the greatest stumbling block to mature faith lies in the fact that they haven’t found a God big enough for their needs—big enough to ‘account for’ life, and to command their respect and worship.”\textsuperscript{16} What’s true of peoples’ perception of God is also true about their perception of His creation. Many Christians have shunned involvement in the world beyond personal piety because they misinterpret certain passages about God’s creation similar to the way they misinterpret passages about God Himself. If God is ineffectual in His being to accomplish great things for the individual, how could anyone imagine that God could or would accomplish great things for His creation?

This misperception is reinforced by how the word “world” is understood when Christians read that it is under God’s condemnation (1 Cor. 11:32) or when Peter speaks of “the corruption that is in the world” (2 Peter 1:4) and the “defilements of the world” (2 Peter 2:20). From these and other similar passages many well-meaning Christians conclude that any contact with the world and the things that operate in the world will have an adverse effect on their relationship with Jesus Christ. Tom Minnery understands the mixed message some Christians get when they read these passages:

> It isn’t difficult to see why some people read their Bible and plunge into the world’s problems, believing that since Christ loved the world so much, they should develop a love for it as well. On the other hand, it’s obvious why some Christians might read the same passages
and conclude that it is ungodly even to help citizens register to vote.¹⁷

Much of this misunderstanding comes from reading the Bible in bits and pieces rather than as an integrated whole. In addition, there is the issue of language and the different ways “world” is used in literature. The Bible is literature, and we should expect to find certain literary features among its many stories.¹⁸ Since the Bible uses “world” in a variety of ways and in distinctive contexts, we should not take the way “world” is used in one context and assume that it has the same meaning in every context. For example, the word “lion” refers to both Jesus and Satan but in different ways. The context gives us the proper setting for the correct interpretation. A lion has many attributes, some good (royalty and dignity: Gen. 49:9–10; Num. 23:24; Prov. 28:1) and some bad (ruthlessness and cunning: Psalm 10:9; 22:13). Jesus is the lion from the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5), and Satan “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). It’s obvious that “lion” is not being used in the same way in both contexts. Satan is described as a “serpent” (Gen. 3:1), and Christians are told to be “wise as serpents” (Matt. 10:16). We can hardly conclude that being “wise as serpents” means we should be like Satan who is said to be liar (John 8:44).

If we follow the logic that some use in reference to “world”—that “world” is always a description of an evil domain to be avoided—then we could make a similar claim regarding the use of serpent and lion. The varied meanings of words and how they are used in specific contexts are keys to understanding any type of literature, including the Bible.

The Bible and the “World”

While the Bible’s use of “world” has a number of specialized meanings, in most cases it differs little from the way we use the word in everyday conversation and writing: A Major League “World Series” is a sports competition that can include baseball teams from only two countries (the United States and Canada);²⁰ the televi-
sion show “Dave’s World” was about the limited life and times of comedian Dave Barry; being “on top of the world” has nothing to do with climbing the highest peak of Mt. Everest; Jiminy Cricket’s song about it being “a small world after all” is not a description of planetary dimensions; and claiming that “love makes the world go ’round” is hardly an established law of physics. Few people have a problem understanding these varied uses of the word “world” in normal speech because they understand the context in which the word is used. The same is true for the way the Bible uses “world.” Different contexts can change the meaning of a word. It’s the interpreter’s task to pay close attention to the subject matter in order to understand what meaning the author has in mind when he uses “world.” In John 1:10, “world” is being used three different ways with no confusion.

The World as God’s Physical Creation

God’s first creative act was the creation of the cosmos, the physical world: “In the beginning God created the heavens and earth” (Gen. 1:1). What was God’s opinion of His work?: “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (1:31). From the New Testament, we not only know that “the world was made through Him” but that Jesus “was in the world” (John 1:10; cf. Heb. 1:2–3; Col. 1:16). The created order is God’s doing, and it plays a significant role in God’s providential plan:

Christ was chosen “before the foundation of the world” (1 Pet. 1:20), and Hebrews speaks of what Christ said when he “came into the world” (Heb. 10:5). Paul says that there are “many different languages in the world” (1 Cor. 14:10). The meaning is straightforward: the reference is to our physical habitat, the earth.21

In his address to the Athenian philosophers, Paul drew from the common belief that God “made the world and all things in it” (Acts
17:24). The one, true God, who made the cosmos (17:31) and could save them from their sin.

The Greek word *kosmos* ("world"), from which we get the English words cosmos, cosmic, cosmopolitan, microcosm, and cosmology,\(^\text{22}\) can designate the entire created order (Matt. 13:35; 24:21; Luke 11:50; John 17:5, 24), the earth in particular (Matt. 4:8; Mark 14:9; Luke 12:30; John 11:9), a large group (John 12:19), a political/social/religious system (Rev. 11:15), a competing world system (1 John 5:19), and, as we will see, the particular domain of God’s redemptive work.

**The World as the Object of God’s Redeeming Grace**

One of the most cherished verses in the Bible is “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16; cf. 2 Cor. 5:19). By understanding the redemptive context of John, the use of “world” is best understood to teach that Jesus’ love has no national, racial, or geographical limitations, and that it is not restricted to any one group of people. The Samaritans, who as a group were ostracized by the Jews, were embraced by Jesus. Upon hearing Jesus’ redemptive message, they said the following to the Samaritan woman who first met Jesus at the well: “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). The “eternal gospel” is to be preached “to those who live on the land, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people” (Rev. 14:6), that is, to the world.

Prior to Pentecost, the gospel was almost exclusively an Israelite-only message with some exceptions (Matt. 10:5; 15:21–28). A non-Israelite family could be incorporated into Israel by faith (e.g., Rahab’s family: Josh. 2:8–14; cf. Matt. 1:5). Under the New Covenant, there is neither Jew nor Gentile (Gal. 3:28) because the dividing wall separating the two worlds was dismantled by Jesus’ redemptive work (Eph. 2:11–22). Jesus is now the “Savior of the world.”
“The World is Unimportant”

Jesus’ redemptive love extends to Jews (Matt. 15:24), Canaanites (15:22), Samaritans (John 4:42), and Gentiles in general (Matt. 12:18, 21; Luke 2:32; Acts 9:15; 10:45; 11:1, 18). Jesus was “to die for the nation; and not for the nation only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad,” that is, His elect from around the world (John 11:51–52; 10:16). This was a novel idea for first-century Jews. Even Peter had to be convinced by God that non-Jews (the world as distinct from Israel) also would share in covenantal blessings through the cross of Christ (Acts 10–11:1–18; 15:1–29; Gal. 2:11–14). This is why Peter could say, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:34b).

The World as Referring to All Without Distinction

The Pharisees were concerned enough about Jesus’ impact on the hearts and minds of the Jews, especially in the capital city of Jerusalem, that they issued this frantic warning: “The world has gone after Him” (John 12:19; cf. 7:4; 14:22; 16:21; 18:20). The world in this context means a large group of people and not millions of people from around the globe—not everybody without exception, but everybody without distinction in Israel: young and old, male and female, and Jew and Gentile (12:20). The word “all” is used in a similar way throughout the Bible (e.g., Matt. 3:5; 4:23–24). “For example, Mark 11:32 tells us that ‘all men counted that John was a prophet’ but obviously only people aware of what was going on could have been intended. In John 8:2 we are told that ‘all people came to Him’ but we know the Pharisees did not do so. In both cases it would be more appropriate to say ‘all kinds of’ people.”23 We use “all” in a similar way today.

The World as a Political System

The advance of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire caused enough alarm that some claimed that Jesus’ disciples had “upset the
world” (Acts 17:6). Although a different word is used for “world” (oikoumene), the meaning is similar to kosmos in application. In the days of the early church, Roman ideology, military strength, and commerce dominated the Mediterranean world. The inhabited earth, as far as the New Testament writers were concerned, was an alien political and religious world ruled by the Roman Empire (Matt. 24:14; Luke 2:1; 11:27–28).

These gospel opponents understood that an allegiance with Jesus would mean that their divine king, Caesar, could no longer claim the title of Dominus et Deus, “lord and god.” The competitive threat of Jesus’ lordship to the prevailing political kingdom of Rome led to Jason and his associates being charged with anti-kingdom (Roman) activities: “They all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:7). The use of “world” in this context means the world of pagan Rome dominated by all of its attendant decadence, including its toleration of occult practices (8:9–11; 13:6–12; cf. 19:19) and worship of rulers (12:20–24).

The World as Antithesis

How can it be “that friendship with the world is hostility toward God” (James 4:4) when we know that “God so loved the world” (John 3:16)? If “world” is given the same meaning in every context in which it appears, then we would have a contradiction. The “world” James is describing is the world of unbelief, not the world as a place, a sphere of influence, or the realm of redemption. The use of kosmos, as James describes it, is “a widespread disposition and power in mankind for evil in opposition to God.” The Bible uses kosmos to characterize what sinful men and women have done with their world and shows its antithesis to God’s ideal world and His moral order (1 Cor. 11:32; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 2:15–17).

The world is in sin and therefore needs to be saved (John 1:20; 3:17; 4:42; 12:47; 16:8). The world is the place of darkness, ethically speaking, into which the light
(God’s holy Son, Jesus Christ) has shone (John 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46). The world is *spiritually dead* and thus needs life given to it (John 6:33, 51); this clearly demonstrates that “world” cannot be taken in a natural sense, for the world (understood descriptively as the created order) is animated and alive.\(^{25}\)

Scripture plainly teaches that Christians are to be *in* the world (geographically) but not *of* the world (morally) (John 15:19; 17:14–15, 16, 18; 1 John 2:15). If the world as a place is to be rejected, then God violated His own prohibition by sending His Son into the world and by taking on human flesh and leaving His newly formed body of believers behind to carry out His mission in His name. God does not call on us to escape from the world as a place but to avoid worldliness as a system of belief and competing allegiance. Paul wrote to the Corinthians “not to associate with immoral people” (1 Cor. 5:9). Some took this to mean a complete separation from the world. But this is not what Paul had in mind, “for then you would have to go out of the world” (1 Cor. 5:10). Christians are to remain in the world, while those so-called Christians who practice immorality were to be removed from fellowship (1 Cor. 5:13).

**Conclusion**

Scripture is our guide as we deal with the world and not the two-dimensional worldview of either secularism (making the world or nature absolute) or pietism (escaping from the duties of this world). God “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14) in this world! We, as Christ’s disciples, are to carry out His mission in the world. Jesus worked in His earthly father’s shop as a carpenter, affirming the goodness of the created order and the value of physical labor. He healed the bodies of the infirm. He fed the masses. The Bible calls on us to care for the widow and orphan. This is what it means to be in the world but not of the world.
Notes


20. Little League includes more than 100 countries from around the world. The winning team in America plays the winner of the international competition.


